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THE MOONCALF

No creature has had more undeserved greatness thrust upon it than had a poor misshapen calf born at Freiberg in Saxony on December 8, 1522. Its hind legs were straight like a man's; one foreleg was curled close to its body and the other extended in front of it. Its skin hung in loose wrinkles and what particularly distinguished it was a large fold over the head and shoulders resembling a monk's cowl. So remarkable a monster must certainly portend something awful; its fame spread with incredible rapidity. Almost instantly an artist was secured to take its picture, though, to judge by the result, in doing so he forgot to ask it to "look pleasant." The likeness, together with a note of the time of its birth, was sent forthwith to the best local expert on monsters, an astrologer living at Prague. This gentleman in his professional capacity doubtless had one eye fixed on the heavenly bodies, but the other was cocked on a body of quite a different nature, the Inquisition, which was particularly strong and vigilant in Bohemia. After casting the creature's horoscope, and after due consideration of the conjunction (near Prague) of the bodies heavenly and infernal, the learned scientist discovered that the monster did indeed signify something terrible, indeed the most awful thing possible—Martin Luther. This important addition to human knowledge was communicated to the world in a broadside published in less than a month after the calf's birth, dedicated to Margrave George of Brandenburg. Strange to say, that nobleman was not as pleased as he should have been to have his name appear in connection with those of the astrologer, the abortion, and the heretic, for on January 5, 1523, he wrote Luther a long and labored letter protesting that he had been ignorant of the intentions of the stargazer and disapproved of his zeal. Whether he also apologized to the calf, history does not relate. He called the astrologer a fool.

The Margrave's ungracious attitude was not shared in most Catholic circles, where the glad tidings of the pointed and personal rebuke thus delicately administered by heaven to Martin Luther

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were received as the highest possible vindication of the noble science of astrology. The brochure of the savant of Prague was appropriately phrased in technical language incomprehensible to the ordinary layman, but like all great messages it was soon taken up and popularized. Among the several literateurs who undertook this task, the most eminent was perhaps Rev. John Dobneck, commonly called Cochlaeus, who with incredible rapidity published two works on the subject, one in Latin, *Against the Cowled Minotaur of Wittenberg*, and one in German, *A Christian Warning of the City of Rome to Germany*. His *haute vulgarisation* sometimes became very vulgar indeed. Coming from a man who had seen Luther only two years previously his personal assurance that in appearance the "half-monkish calf" closely resembled the heretic is worth much.

Luther's enemies were at no pains to conceal their conclusions from him; rather they felt it their duty to call his attention to the crushing snub he had received from the higher powers. Among his many admirable qualities that of treating attacks with silent contempt was conspicuous by its absence. One day a student at Wittenberg, Lemnius by name, published a set of indecent and cutting verses lampooning his teacher. Such ebullitions of youthful spirits are not unknown nowadays, but we should hardly expect a leading professor of Harvard or Oxford to retaliate in the way chosen by the theologian of Saxony. Not content with expelling Lemnius, as he very well deserved, Luther wrote a counter set of satiric verses against him, in which the candid reader must recognize that the scurrility of the original offender was well over-trumped.

So in the present case Luther was not to be outdone. If interpreting monsters was the rage, he would give the very best interpretation—from the polemic standpoint—possible. In the previous year his attention had been arrested by a description of a truly horrific creature said to have been found in the Tiber in 1496. Monsters were apparently as common then in the flesh as they are now in art, and perhaps they fulfilled much the same function of stimulating a jaded curiosity. In this case, the animal was a bit extreme, perhaps of the post-impressionist or cubist variety; it had an ass's head, a woman's body, an elephant's foot, a fish's fin, a dragon's head in place of a tail—this face probably had a *stern* expression—and

other attractions to match. In the good old times it was as plain as day to the meanest intellect—and unfortunately to some others—that such a nondescript must be a portent of divine wrath. Luther and Melanchthon accordingly held a consultation over these two creatures, and did not take long in discovering that they were unmistakable warnings sent by heaven to the Catholics, practical satires, as it were, published by the Creator against his particular enemies, the pope and the monks. Why not? They were precisely in the taste of most sixteenth-century polemics. Being interpreted they were, in short, the “pope-ass” and the “monk-calf.” The first of these words was built on the analogy of the second, which was, in turn, a pun of the kind Luther loved, on the earlier German word “mooncalf.” *Mondkalb* was already in good usage to signify a false conception, or a mass of dead flesh, which Pliny calls *mola*. Prior to Luther’s time it had not been used in the sense of monster, but only in the technical anatomical way. The German Reformer was not free from the besetting sin of many great writers in letting the sound not only echo the sense but predetermine it, and under his powerful pen the term *Mönchkalb*, already half suggested by Cochlaeus, sprang into the literary language of the Fatherland.

In order to present their views to the public, the Wittenberg professors collaborated in a work published with all possible speed under the title: *Deutung der zwo gewlichen Figuren, Bapstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu freyberg in Meyssen funden. Philippus Melanchthon. Doct. Martinus Luther. Wittenberg. M.D. xxij.* Melanchthon took the first monster and set forth with great lucidity the opinion that the ass’s head signified the mental capacity of the popes, the woman’s body their sensuality, the elephant’s foot their tyranny, and so on. Luther’s interpretation of the second creature is more to our present purpose. The Reformer, having sometimes been called by his followers a prophet, begins by denying the soft impeachment, but says that though he cannot foretell the future with certainty he hopes that the calf is a presage of the day of judgment. At any rate it is plain that by this animal God has symbolized the nature of the monks, just as in Dan. 8:21 he represented Alexander the Great by a he-goat. “That God has put the clerical dress and the holy cowl on a calf is an undoubted and plain sign that the whole of monkery and

nunnery is nothing else than a false, lying appearance and an outward pretense of a spiritual and godly life." Furthermore, the wrinkles and divisions of the skin point to the division of the monks into various orders; the posture of the forelegs suggests the attitude of a preacher, a blind leader of the blind. All the supposed vices of the monastic life, but particularly hypocrisy, are traced in the malformation of this creature. The author closes with the most sensible remark in the whole essay, namely, that he does not ground his rejection of monastic vows on such signs, clear warnings as they are, but only on the Bible.

This little pamphlet of eight pages enjoyed much popularity. It was reprinted seven times in the same year. In an edition of 1535 Luther wrote a postscript which he called an "Amen," underscoring the invective of Melanchthon. In 1545 he returned to the same idea in a polemic against the Papacy. The original work did not go long without an answer, this time by the learned divine Jerome Emser, who in a pamphlet published in 1524 asserted: "Although the contumacious monk [Luther] well knows that the said calf signifies nothing but himself and his followers the apostate clergy, yet in his farce published at the last carnival he tries to interpret it against the other good and pious monks."

In about a generation the monk-calf attained an international reputation, marked by the translation into French of the essays of the Wittenberg professors, under the title: *De Deux monstres prodigieux, à savoir, D'un Asne-Pape, qui fut trouué à Rome en la rivière du Tibre, l'an M. CCCC.XCVI, et D'un Veau-moine nay à Friberg en Misne, l'an M.D.XXVIII [sic]. Qui sont vrais presages de l'ire de Dieu: attestez & declarez, l'un par P. Melanchthon, & l'autre par M. Luther. Avec Quelques exemples des iugemens de Dieu en la morte espouventable, & desespoir de plusieurs, pour auoir abandonné la verité de l'Euangile. Chez Jean Crespin. M.D.LVII.* The translator, whoever he was, succumbed to the temptation to improve upon the original, for he retouched the Ass-pope drastically and the Monk-calf lightly. As the printer, Jean Crespin, was a capable writer, apparently familiar with German, it is possible that he made the version himself. His press was at Geneva, devoted chiefly to publishing the works of his friend John Calvin. In October, 1557, Crespin was buying books at

the Frankfort fair, and it is possible that he got the German work then, though it is also quite likely that he or the translator got it elsewhere earlier. It is perhaps allowable to see in the political situation of the Calvinists a stimulus to the translation of the work at this time. Not only were Protestants being burned in England, France, and large parts of Germany, but the strained relations of the Lutherans and Calvinists rendered their position doubly precarious. In 1557 they were almost at swords' points; it was feared at Geneva that the Lutherans would unite with the Catholics, as they had done once before, to crush the more radical branch of the Reformed church. Calvin was so exasperated that he called his fellow-Protestants "ministers of Satan" and "professed enemies of Christ." It is quite possible then, indeed quite probable, that the French version of the pamphlet in question may have been intended to widen the breach between Catholics and Lutherans. Without positive information on this subject, however, this can remain only a conjecture.

From France the two monsters made their way into England, a confirmation in detail of the general fact established by Sir Sidney Lee that in the sixteenth century England was more open to French than to German literary influences. The title of the version runs as follows: *Of two Wonderful Popish Monsters, to wyt, Of a Popish Asse which was found in Rome in the riuer Tyber (1496) and of a Moonkish Calfe, calued at Friberge in Misnie (1528). Which are the very shewings and tokens of God's wrath against the blind, obstinate and monstrous Papists. Witnessed and declared, the one by P. Melanchthon, the other by M. Luther. Translated out of French into English by John Brooke of Assh. London. Th. East. 1579.* John Brooke, of Ash-next-Sandwich, was a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, chiefly known for his translations of six French tracts between 1577 and his death in 1582. East was a well-known printer, probably a scion of the Italian house of Este, who made a specialty of music, though he also published other things.

Thus introduced to the British public, the "moonkish calfe" seems to have had a greater success than has hitherto been recognized. There are the best of reasons for believing that this little tract gave a new meaning, and thus a new lease of life, to the word "mooncalf,"

which had previously been used only in an anatomical or pathological sense, but now began to signify "monster," and, derivatively, "fool." Thus in Cooper's Latin *Thesaurus* (1565), "moonecalfe" is given as the translation of the Latin word *mola* (literally "mole"), a growth of dead flesh. Similar instances of this use might be cited, but according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an extremely reliable guide in these matters, no example of the word in the sense of "monster" can be found in any author earlier than Shakespeare. I do not think that Shakespeare borrowed the word directly from the pamphlet; the great dramatist did not care for "the spleeny Lutherans," as he called them, and probably read as little of them as possible. My contention is that the word in the new sense was *mis à la mode* by the tract, and that, after having attained popular currency, it was taken from the mouths of the people into formal literature about a generation after the translation of the Lutheran pamphlet. Consider the data. "Mooncalf" is unknown in the signification of "monster" and is rare in any sense prior to the first years of the seventeenth century. Then, all of a sudden, in Shakespeare, Jonson, Drayton, Chapman, and others it becomes almost common. Something must have occurred to produce this change. The springs of language lie deep, but its laws are as exact as are any other natural laws. It is the universally observed rule that words come into popular use before they are taken into literature. The noun we are considering must have come into general currency in the last part of the sixteenth century. To those familiar with the appetite for the marvelous displayed by Englishmen at this time, and also with the great success that popular religious tracts then often attained, there is nothing paradoxical in the contention that the tract in question actually gave rise to the linguistic phenomenon here described. Note the spelling of the word, "moonkish calf," probably an intentional alteration of the normal "monkish." Thus what had been a pun with Luther in German was just reversed in English, and for the same reason, to play upon an already existing, though hitherto rare and technical, word.

Examples will reinforce the argument better than anything else could do. First of all in *The Tempest* (1610) Caliban is repeatedly called a "mooncalf" (Act II, Scene ii). The *Variorum* refers to Pliny, but how anyone can read the passages indicated and suppose

that Shakespeare really had Pliny in mind, or anything derivable from this author, passes my comprehension. Pliny's *mola* was, as we have seen, translated by "mooncalf," but the word had so totally alien a sense that reference to this source is not the solution of a riddle but the propounding of one. Again Chapman, in his *Bussy d'Amboise* (1607), speaks ungallantly of women as "the most perfect images of the Moone (Or still-unweand sweet Mooncalves with white faces)." This is of course an intentional pun, but the use of the word in a popular way is none the less significant. By 1620 even Jonson's learned sock did not disdain to employ a term apparently by that time thoroughly established. In his *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon*, the following dialogue takes place between a Factor, a Printer, and two Heralds:

FACTOR: Are there no self-lovers there? . . .

SECOND HERALD: I think some two or three of them live yet, but they are turned to mooncalves by this.

PRINTER: O, ay, mooncalves! What monster is that I pray you?

SECOND HERALD: Monster! none at all, a very familiar thing, like our fool here on earth.

FIRST HERALD: The ladies there play with them instead of little dogs.

In similar fashion Michael Drayton wrote a whole poem on "The Moone-Calfe," first published in his collection of verses, called after the first of them, *The Battle of Agincourt* (1627). This is a rank satire of the conventional stamp. The mooncalf is a bastard son of the Devil and the World, an ignorant sot and roué, but one who, nevertheless, gets on famously, and finds himself as prosperous as he ought to be detested:

Rags, running horses, dogs, drabs, drinks and dice,
The only things that he doth hold in price.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to trace the further use of the word, as might easily be done, from Dryden to Carlyle, with whom, as might be expected, so outlandish a term was a prime favorite. It may not be uninteresting, however, to add that Luther's pamphlet was once again anglicized, as: *Interpretation of two horrible monsters, an ass-pope, . . . and a calf-monk. Translated by the Reverend H. Cole, London. Eedes. 1823.*

AMHERST, MASS.

PRESERVED SMITH